August 24, 2020 marked the 28th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea and China. The first signs of improving relations were outlined back in the 1970s, when bilateral trade started through third countries. In 1983, a meeting of representatives of two countries was held at the government level. It was triggered by the hijacking of a Chinese civilian airplane that made an emergency landing in the Republic of Korea. However, the strongest impetus for the development of bilateral relations was through sports. In 1986 and 1988, Chinese athletes took part in the Asian and Olympic Games in Seoul, and in 1990, the South Korean national team took part in the Asian Games in Beijing. In the same year, trade missions were opened in both countries, partially taking over consular functions and paving the way for the opening of diplomatic missions in 1992.

The relations between the Republic of Korea and China have turned chilly since the USA deployed the THAAD missile defense system in Korea in 2016. China banned its tourists from traveling to the Republic of Korea and has taken a number of other measures. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the decline in mutual exchanges.

As noted by the Chinese Ambassador to South Korea, Xing Haiming, China and South Korea are strategic cooperative partners, while South Korea and the United States are in an alliance relationship. China is well aware that both bilateral relationships are important for South Korea, however, “China sufficiently trusts and respects South Korea’s external policy, which it has chosen in light of its national interests, fairness and justice China also would like to work together with South Korea to develop bilateral ties in a sustained, sound and stable manner”.

In late August, in an interview with the Global Times, Director of the Institute for Northeast Asian Studies of the Heilongjiang Provincial Academy of Social Sciences Da Zhigang said that the Republic of Korea and China maintained good relations during the pandemic, keeping open contacts on trade, investment and exchange at the nongovernmental level. Da Zhigang emphasized that the Republic of Korea, though to a lesser extent than Japan, still actively supported the US pressure on China, but, and there are enough examples of it.

**Interaction at the Top and Ministerial Levels**

Throughout 2020, South Korea and China have negotiated the organization of Xi Jinping’s visit to Seoul in the first half of the year, especially after Xi Jinping’s meeting with President Moon Jae-in in Beijing in December 2019. The country’s mass media constantly wrote that “the upcoming visit Chinese President Xi Jinping to Seoul would become a new turning point in strengthening bilateral relations.” Xi last visited South Korea in July 2014, and Moon visited China twice (in December 2017 and 2019), but Xi did not return the love even, even though he has visited Pyongyang.

On the evening of May 13, President of the Republic of Korea Moon Jae-in and President of the Chinese President Xi Jinping held a 34-minute telephone conversation, which was the second such conversation this year and fifth since Moon’s enthronement, during which Xi Jinping confirmed his desire to visit Seoul. In response, Moon Jae-in stressed that the visit would be very important for the further development of bilateral ties (that is, the settlement of bilateral differences caused by the deployment of American THAAD missile defense systems in the south of the Korean Peninsula).

On August 22, during a visit to the Republic of Korea by the head of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the CPC Central Committee Yang Jiechi (details about the visit are available in a separate section), it was confirmed that Xi Jinping’s visit would take place immediately after the situation with COVID-19 stabilized and the Republic of Korea
would become the first country to be visited by Xi Jinping after the re-opening of borders. Yang still avoided a direct question about the date and, as the South Korean President’s Executive Office reported, the parties came to an agreement on the details of the visit during working consultations.

However, according to Director of the Sejong Institute’s Center for Chinese Studies Lee Song-hyun, “Xi Jinping’s visit to South Korea is likely to become a double-edged sword for Seoul. It is not clear what Moon can give Xi in return for the visit, given that Xi is likely to address South Korea’s place in US anti-China initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Economic Prosperity Network, and the Clean Network initiative. Moreover, Xi may ask Moon to officially announce South Korea’s accession to the Belt and Road Initiative.

In other words, China is “suspending” the possibility of Xi Jinping’s trip in order to at least force South Korea to remain neutral against the backdrop of confrontation with the USA.

On May 13, 2020, South Korean and Chinese defense chiefs Jeong Kyeong-doo and Wei Fenghe held telephone calls and “agreed to jointly pursue the development of their defense exchanges and cooperation, as well as the creation of military hotlines between their air forces and the naval forces, including taking into account the situation with COVID-19”.

The next telephone conversation of the defense ministers, in which the new head of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Korea Suh Wook took part, was held on October 21 at the initiative of the Chinese side. The parties again discussed issues of intensifying exchanges and cooperation in the field of defense, touching upon the situation on the Korean Peninsula and in the region. Suh Wook explained recent security circumstances to his Chinese counterpart and asked for Beijing to play a “constructive role” for peace and stability on the peninsula.

On July 3, South Korea’s chief nuclear negotiator Lee Do-Hoon met separately with the top Chinese and Russian envoys to Seoul and discussed the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

On August 19, Minister for Reunification Affairs of the Republic of Korea, Lee In-young, met with the Chinese Ambassador to Seoul, Xing Haiming. The Minister noted that “inter-Korean relations had been at an impasse for some time, but we believe that the dialogue should be continued under any circumstances,” and thanked China for the constructive role it plays in supporting inter-Korean dialogue and developing relations with the two Koreas. From this perspective, Lee called for China to support its plans to “develop inter-Korean relations into a peaceful, economic and biotic community” through humanitarian cooperation and small-scale trade.

In his turn, the Ambassador acknowledged Beijing’s unequivocal and staunch support for denuclearization, peace and possible reunification on the Korean Peninsula, which, as he said, should benefit not only the people from around there, but also the people of China. He expressed his regret that the things on the Korean Peninsula had gotten worse.

On September 10, Lee Do-Hoon held a telephone conversation with Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui and explained to him the essence of Seoul’s efforts to bring the DPRK back to dialogue.

As you can see, Seoul is actively trying to persuade Beijing to influence Pyongyang in the “right” direction. “The most important reason that President Moon wants to have good relations with China is primarily economic, and secondly, North Korea issues, now that US-North Korea relations are virtually frozen. We know that China still has channels of communication with North Korea. Therefore we are hoping that Chinese President Xi Jinping will play a more active role in facilitating the resumption of South-North talks and North Korea-US bilateral talks,” an anonymous senior diplomatic source said.

In October 2020, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi planned to visit the Republic of Korea, but due to the pandemic intensification, the visit was canceled. Official Beijing explains this by the heavy schedule of the Minister. Wang Yi was expected to visit Seoul and Tokyo after the annual plenum of the Chinese Communist Party, which was held on October 26-29 in Beijing, but it’s the middle of November now, and there has been no visit yet.

It is worth noting that all meetings are rather “pointless talking”, just mutual sharing of information and assurances of understanding and assistance. Their purpose is to indicate the very fact of continuing the dialogue, but there is no talk of real cooperation.

However, the active efforts of Ambassador Xing should be noted. On August 25, he donated US $ 20,000 to the International Vaccine Institute (IVI) to be used to develop coronavirus vaccines, and on September 27, he called for South Korea to join the Beijing’s global data security initiative, as opposed to the US project “Clean Network” (The
US program seeks to remove what it calls “untrusted” Chinese tech firms and apps, including Huawei, from its telecommunications and other key networks). “Imposing excessive US sanctions on Chinese IT enterprises runs afoul of market principles and international rules but also conflicts with principles of market economy and fair competition,” the Ambassador noted.

Yang Jiechi’s Visit

The most important event of this period, such as the visit of Yang Jiechi, who last visited Seoul in 2018 should be discussed in more detail.

According to Seoul’s official statements, it was planned to “discuss issues of bilateral relations, including cooperation in the fight against COVID-19, high-level exchanges, the current situation on the Korean Peninsula and in the world.” “One of the main items on the engagement agenda will be arrangements for the visit of the PRC President to Seoul.”

On August 21, Yang Jiechi arrived in Busan after his two-day visit to Singapore. As the South Korean press specifically noted, the choice of Busan as the venue was made taking into account Yang’s route and requests and has nothing to do with the spread of the coronavirus. A visit of courtesy to the President of the Republic of Korea is said not to be planned (although such visit is usually practiced). All the abovementioned immediately attracted close attention from mass media.

Yang’s counterpart was the National Security Advisor to the President of the Republic of Korea, Suh Hoon, who, emerging from four hours of talks (and another two hours at a full-dress dinner), told reporters that the parties “had a very good conversation, spending a lot of time talking about all topics broadly and sufficiently.” Yang said that he had had an adequate and very good discussion. The meeting participants noted the importance of holding a trilateral South Korean-Sino-Japanese summit, scheduled to be held in the Republic of Korea next year. Moon is expected to chair this year’s session, which will be joined by the Prime Ministers of Japan and China. During his meeting with Suh, Yang explained China’s position in connection with the recent Beijing-Washington rifts, which, according to Yonghap News Agency, could be seen as a message that Seoul should not go against Beijing’s stance.

Suh Hoon stressed that the South Korean side would continue efforts for progress in the Korea peace process. For his part, Yang Jiechi promised “constant communication and cooperation” with South Korea for the denuclearization and establishment of peace on the Korean Peninsula.

It bears pointing out, once again, that these are mere promises of nothing.

Among other issues discussed were accelerating the second phase of free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations, signing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) within the year and tapping jointly into a third country market.

Moreover, Suh requested China’s cooperation for the prompt increase in the number of flights and visa issuance for South Koreans, and Yang then suggested that two sides should keep cooperating as “important neighbors and cooperation partners.”

Hong Kong Issue and Other Support for Sinophobic Forces

On May 28, 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea emphasized the importance of Hong Kong’s supporting its prosperity and development under the “one country, two systems” policy.

On June 2, amid concerns that Beijing’s contentious security legislation could erode the semiautonomous territory’s civil liberties, the Foreign Ministry declared that South Korea respected the 1984 declaration between China and Britain ensuring Hong Kong’s autonomy. The wording of the statement was almost identical: “Hong Kong is an important region that has close people-to-people and economic exchanges with South Korea, and we believe it is important that Hong Kong’s prosperity and development continue under the ‘one country, two systems’ principle.”

It should also be noted that articles about the persecution against American missionaries in China or reports that in September 2020, the Chinese authorities introduced unified textbooks in Chinese language in the schools of Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture on those subjects that were previously taught in Korean, have frequently appeared in the central national newspapers of the Republic of Korea. Moreover, since 2023, the system of preferential points for representatives of national minorities for enrolling at local universities will be abolished, and university qualifying exams in the Chinese language, Literature and Political Science will be held exclusively in Chinese. Thus the Korean
language in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture is fading into the background, which causes Seoul’s concerns about the saving the Korean language in this region.

There are still myths that, in an attempt not to spoil relations with Beijing, Moon did not close the border with China, which caused the epidemic, because every day from 10,000 to 30,000 Chinese visit South Korea.

There is a no less popular myth that in late January/early February 2020, while the country was experiencing an acute shortage of masks and other equipment, Moon secretly sent $5 million to China, as well as 3 million masks, 10,000 protective suits and other medical supplies. And that’s just what went through the state: Samsung gave China 1 million masks, 10,000 protective suits and about $5 million; LG shipped 1.2 million masks, 10,000 protective suits and about $450,000; other companies including Hyundai, SK, CJ, POSCO, Doosan, Asiana Airlines, also quickly provided China support. More masks, supplies and money have been sent sent to China since then, despite the shortage of masks and PPEs for doctors and nurses in South Korea, as well as nation-wide shortages of masks for the South Korean public.

This also includes boycotts against Dysney’s “Mulan” after the film’s final credits thanked government of Xinjiang, which is accused of human rights abuses against ethnic minorities. The film’s lead actress Liu Yifei was ostracized for her comments supporting the Hong Kong police’s crackdown against protesters in August last year.

The Declaration of a Global Citizen in Korea, a non-governmental organization working for solidarity with Hong Kong citizens, launched an online boycott campaign, urging social media users to share images calling for the boycott of the film.

However, Chinese interference in South Korean affairs, where real issues of illegal migration or poaching are mixed with attempts by conservatives to play the “Chinese card”, portraying Moon Jae-in as a stooge of the CCP, is a topic for a separate article.

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